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PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH MAJOR GROUPS

Summary report of the dialogue session with non-governmental organizations

(15 April 1997)

Chairman: Mr. Czeslaw Wieckowski (Poland), Vice-Chairman, Commission on Sustainable Development

Facilitator: Mr. Roberto Bissio, Instituto del Tercer Mundo

Presenters: Representatives of the following organizations made presentations: Environmental Liaison Center International (ELCI); Association of Small Farmers of the Pacific Coast (Costa Rica); Country Women's Association of Nigeria (COWAN); Friends of the Earth International; Environmental Justice Networking Forum (South Africa); Third World Network; Latin American Network on Forests; Consumers International.

PRESENTATIONS

In the five years since the Rio Conference, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an increasingly important role in efforts to further sustainable development throughout the world. In their dialogue session, NGOs highlighted past NGO activities, discussed Agenda 21 implementation at the

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local, national and regional levels and set forth actions for the Commission on Sustainable Development to undertake in the next five years.

Activities

The dialogue session provided a sampling of NGO activities. These included research on Agenda 21 implementation, studies regarding sustainable development indicators and organization of new grass-roots groups. For example:

- A study by ELCI assessed grass-roots action taken on Agenda 21 and made recommendations for the future. The resultant report, entitled "Grass-roots reflection on Agenda 21", reveals that Governments are treating the superficial manifestations of unsustainable practices rather than the underlying causes. Furthermore, local level implementation is not occurring as fast as it should be.

- Friends of the Earth conducted a study of sustainable development indicators.

- NGOs in Costa Rica have improved dialogue with government officials.

- African women have established networks for rural and grass-roots women.

- Women in Nigeria developed a strategy for gaining credit for women.

- NGOs in South Africa are working to further environmental justice issues and develop environmental policies for sustainability.

Obstacles

Obstacles to NGO success under Agenda 21 include ingrained production and consumption patterns, lack of access to decision-making, trade liberalization and low political will in regard to sustainable development issues. For example:

- Government interest is often lacking in regard to Agenda 21 implementation.

- NGOs are often excluded from government decision-making, especially in countries with rigid and closed governmental processes.

- It is often difficult to convince decision makers to act on initiatives developed at the community level.

- Business and industry are often unwilling to become involved with sustainable development issues.

- Inequity at the local, national and global levels obstructs many efforts towards sustainable development.

- Political will is lacking in forestry issues.

- Education is an important yet overlooked component of sustainable development.

- Deregulation and globalization are increasing the power of transnational corporations and increasing the inequities between rich and poor.

- Lack of resources is an important limiting factor for NGOs.

Priorities

NGOs outlined a spectrum of priorities including eco-sufficiency, NGO/government relations, environmental education and trade. For example:

- Eco-sufficiency should replace the concept of eco-efficiency if society is to become truly sustainable.

- Better mechanisms for NGO/government cooperation are needed at the local and national levels.

- Better mechanisms should be developed for communicating local experiences to the global level and fostering learning.

- Capacity-building should occur in the government sector as well as in the NGO sector.

- Education and awareness-raising should play a larger role in sustainable development efforts.

- Governments should honour commitments they have made for technology sharing and technology transfer.

- NGO collaboration with Governments at the local, national and international levels should be enhanced.

- Changes in production and consumption patterns are essential.

- Trade has important impacts on environment and development and should receive high priority in efforts to promote sustainable development.

- Corporate accountability should be addressed explicitly and should ensure attention to social and environmental responsibilities.

DIALOGUE

Representative of the following countries made statements during the dialogue session: Australia, China, Finland, Japan, Norway, Philippines, Sweden, United States of America. Statements were made by the following NGOs: Q2000 of Sweden, NGO Working Group on Women, Health and Environment, NGO Education Caucus, Costa Rican National Council for NGOs, Association of Northern Peoples for Environment and Development. NGOs from Bolivia, Mauritius and the

Russian Federation also made statements, as did the representative of the European Commission.

Several government representatives described local initiatives in their countries. One government representative noted the important role that local municipalities played via monitoring, inspection and enforcement to ensure adherence to environmental standards (Japan). Others noted the positive results that Agenda 21 implementation had yielded in their countries (China, Philippines, Sweden). One NGO representative noted increased coordination between NGOs and Government under Agenda 21 (NGO from Bolivia). Another NGO representative noted the problems of addressing energy and transportation issues in her country (NGO from Sweden). Another noted the lack of NGO participation in policy decision-making (NGO from the Russian Federation).

One government representative elicited several comments from others when she suggested that the Commission on Sustainable Development adopt a procedure instituted under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Australia). For this Convention, NGOs should prepare country reports and Governments would be required to respond to those reports. An NGO panellist responded favourably to the suggestion but noted the financial constraints facing NGOs. Another government representative suggested that NGOs and Governments collaborate on reports, as was done in his country (Philippines).

An NGO representative noted the lack of government reporting to the Commission and inquired about the procedures countries follow in reporting to their constituencies at home (Friends of the Earth). Some government representatives described their reporting procedures. Reporting processes involved numerous stakeholders, meetings, web sites and media (Australia, Canada, Finland, Norway, Sweden, United States).

One NGO representative noted the need for more emphasis on education regarding sustainability issues and noted the lack of educator participation (Education Caucus). Another noted the important educational role that United Nations documents played in her country (NGO from the Russian Federation).

One representative urged that statistics like those presented by Friends of the Earth International be used to convince the unconvinced to take up sustainable development priorities (European Commission). Another suggested that the results of the ELCI study be widely disseminated (NGO from Mauritius).

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

NGOs presented several recommendations to the Commission. These recommendations concern increased dialogue between NGOs and Governments, corporate accountability, trade issues and action on forest problems. In particular, NGOs requested the Commission to:

- Encourage dialogue at the local and national levels as well as at the international level.

- Incorporate trade and environment, trade and development, and the intersection of trade, environment and development into Agenda 21 initiatives and into the future work of the Commission.

- Establish a subcommission or panel on trade and sustainable development.

- Initiate a dialogue with the World Trade Organization and its Committee on Trade and Environment.

- Initiate a new round of commodity agreements.

- Facilitate a sustainable development and equity review of World Trade Organization agreements.

- Initiate a review of the World Trade Organization Agriculture Agreement.

- Take up the issue of intellectual property rights and sustainable development.

- Investigate the impacts of liberalization on sustainable development.

- Urge the special session of the General Assembly to adopt a resolution urging States and organizations to implement activities proposed during the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests.

- Establish a subcommission on corporate accountability.